



Book Review - Beyond Belief: How evidence shows what really works

By Helen Pearson Princeton University Press 2026; 350 pages; \$58.00

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I read this book on a Sunday afternoon without stopping. I have always been a fan of evidence-based research, and I have been involved in approximately 15 systematic reviews since 2008. That is only part of the evidence revolution that is going on around us at the moment.

What made this book so readable? From the historical context of treating scurvy (limes and why Brits are called Limeys by Americans) through to evidence-based policing and education. It also gave some background to the birth of evidence-based medicine and the battles to change establishment views where often it was “Eminence Based Evidence”. The book also gives some insights to the people behind this thinking, Iain Chalmers, Archie Cochrane and David Sackett to name a few. It was also a reminder of why we do things like put babies on their backs to sleep.

From here the book gets interesting as it covers evidence-based approaches to policing, social policy, conservation, business and education. These chapters look at what works. Then working through the COVID pandemic where evidence was produced under pressure and dated quickly. This brings the question of using technology in reviews which in my mind might speed things up, but you also might miss things only a human can see.

One of the most successful approaches when using evidence is Triple P parenting, developed in Aotearoa New Zealand. The book does ask the question why this approach is not more broadly used and suggests that often approaches to such a big area as parenting requires so many agencies to get behind it that it often does not leave the starting blocks.

What might this have to do with health and safety? As a researcher, I’m involved in producing evidence; as a practitioner I need to use the most up-to-date evidence. We need to be able to ask ourselves if what we do or advise, is based on evidence, opinion or hearsay? For example, as an HFE professional I have the evidence (Verbeek et al., 2011), generic training in lifting and handling will not reduce back injuries yet, I still see such training courses offered. There is a need for more evidence to translate into practice.

While health and safety is a profession that is building, some thought has already gone into what types of evidence are available to us (see Table 2, Tait & Crawford 2026). There is not always an evidence-base to call on but we can work consistently to identify the gaps and build evidence and knowledge whether that is experiential or a research study.

I know the phrase “because I said so” never worked as a parent and I didn’t have the advantage of the Triple P approach. However, in today’s world we really need people to back up the claims they are making for all sorts of policies and approaches, not just health and safety. We should all be developing our own “B*llshit meters”.

References

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